

Prairie Chicken Season Set, Sage Grouse Hunt Delayed

By Ron Wilson

A limited prairie chicken hunting season has been given the go-ahead in northeast and southeast North Dakota, while hunters in the southern badlands will have to wait longer than typical this fall to pursue sage grouse.

PRAIRIE GROUSE

(100 permits available for this season were issued in August.)

Opens: October 9

Closes: October 17

Daily limit: 2 (two prairie chickens, or two sharp-tailed grouse, or one sharp-tailed grouse and one prairie chicken)

Possession limit: 2

Shooting hours: 1/2 hour before sunrise to sunset

Areas open only October 9-17 for prairie chickens and sharp-tailed grouse – The area bordered on the west by N.D. No. 32, on the north by the Sheyenne River, on the south by N.D. Highway 11 and on the east by the Red and Bois de Sioux rivers; and an area in Grand Forks County bordered on the east by the Red River, the south by U.S. Highway 2, the west by N.D. Highway 18 and the north by the Walsh and Grand Forks county line.

Prairie chickens haven't been hunted in the state for decades, but efforts to re-establish the nonnatives, also known as pinnated grouse, have taken. The experimental prairie grouse hunting season – dubbed as such because the daily possession and season limits of two birds is any combination of pinnated grouse or sharp-tailed grouse – will be held October 9-17.

A total of 100 permits – 50 for Zone 1 in southeast North Dakota and 50 for Zone 2 in Grand Forks County – were awarded to resident hunters who applied for the prairie grouse season. The last time prairie chickens were fair game in the state was 1945.

A push to better safeguard adult female sage grouse, a segment of the population instrumental in producing future generations, is what influenced State Game and Fish Department wildlife managers to delay season dates this fall. The three-day hunt runs September 27-29. Since the early 1960s, the sage grouse season typically started the Monday after the sharp-tailed grouse opener in early to mid-September.

During the last five early September sage grouse seasons, 88 percent of the birds bagged were adult females, said Jerry Kobriger, Department upland game management supervisor, Dickinson.

However, according to nearly 40 years of sage grouse hunting data, fewer adult females were harvested the later the sage grouse season started in North Dakota. Research from other states, Kobriger said, has indicated the same findings.

The sage grouse daily and possession limit is one bird. Since 1989, harvest per season bounced between 83 and 14 grouse. On average, each season attracted about 124 hunters.

While native to North Dakota, sage grouse in the southwestern part of the state – Slope and Bowman counties boast the most birds – are at the edge of their range. The fall population is estimated at only about 1,000-2,000 birds, which makes it desirable to reduce harvest on the best producers of young.

Peak prairie chicken years in North Dakota were from 1900-1930, biologists tell us. But by the 1960s, the state's population fell to an estimated 4,000-5,000 birds. Twenty years later, prairie chickens disappeared altogether from Grand Forks County, while some remained on the Sheyenne Grasslands.

The prairie chicken comeback in Grand Forks County was fueled by a boost in suitable grassland habitat and the transplanting of birds from Nebraska, Minnesota and South Dakota. Today, the fall grouse population is estimated at about 1,200 birds, similar to the Sheyenne Grasslands.

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